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ABSTRACT

In 1995, a group of school administrators affiliated with the Indiana Executive Fellows Program identified important educational issues. This paper presents findings of a 1997 study that asked a different sample of superintendents to rank a list of educational issues on the basis of importance. Questionnaires were sent to 325 superintendents in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Texas. The overall response rate was almost 71 percent (n=320). The questionnaire asked superintendents to judge each of 25 issues as "less important," "more important," or "of the same importance" as in 1995. The superintendents rated 18 issues as having the same level of importance as assigned by Indiana administrators in the 1995 survey. The superintendents ranked three issues--educational goals, the religious right, and outcome-based education--as having less importance in 1997 than in 1995. They rated technology, school finance in general, state testing programs, and school-finance equity as more important issues for 1997. The majority of the 1997 sample believed that responsibility for education is the responsibility of the state and local governments. (LMI)

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School Administrators' Perceptions of Trends, Issues, And Responsibilities Relating to the Modern Educational Climate

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School Administrators' Perceptions of Trends, Issues, And Responsibilities Relating to the Modern Educational Climate

INTRODUCTION

Both friends and critics of modern education often contend that school administrators react to the latest trend or reform that appears. They would state that issues in education seem to change all the time and that educational administrators operate in a continuously reactive mode.

In 1995, a group of school administrators, affiliated with the Indiana Executive Fellows Program, formulated a list of issues they felt were important to them that particular year. The researchers for this study wanted to look at the following research questions:

1. Are these issues from 1995 in Indiana still important in different states in 1997?
2. If so, are they more important now than they were two years ago?
3. Which issues are most important in 1997?
4. Of those issues which are more important today, does the responsibility for any solution lie at the local, state, or federal level?

METHODOLOGY

Using a list of all school districts in Texas, Illinois, and Massachusetts, the researchers took a random sample in each state. A total of 325 school districts were selected for the study. According to

Krejcie and Morgan (1970), this sample was sufficient for the population, for a 95% confidence level. Questionnaires were sent to the superintendents of the school districts in the three states, with a cover letter and stamped, self-addressed envelope. Of those sent, 230 were returned and were usable, for a return rate of 70.8%. Individual state responses were as follows: Illinois, 69.6%; Massachusetts, 78.0%; Texas, 65.0%. These three states were selected because the researchers had worked in these states, had listings of the school districts, and felt that they represented different areas of the country.

The data were subjected to a frequency analysis using SPSS for Macintosh 6.1 on the College of Education network at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

RESULTS

"The Same" Importance as in 1995

Of the 25 issues given to the superintendents to judge as "less important," "more important," or "the same" in importance today as in 1995, 18 were judged to be the same in importance as in the past. These responses represent the three states taken as a whole. The issues were the following:

- Community involvement in schools
- School choice
- School reform efforts
- "Block" scheduling
- Volunteer programs
- Community relations
- Site based management
- Tech prep programs

Teacher empowerment	Amer. with Disab. Act
Home schooling	Shared decision making
Board/Supt. relations	At risk programs
Gang activities	Year-around school
School-business partnerships	Contracted services vs. in-house

The response for each individual state was very similar to the aggregate total, with Illinois, Massachusetts, and Texas superintendents stating that the issues were the same in importance in 18, 19, and 17 instances, respectively.

"Less Important" Than in 1995

The superintendents, as a group, felt that three issues were less important today than in the past. The number listed is the percentage of superintendents who said that the issue was "less important" today than in 1995:

Goals 2000	51.7%
The religious right	47.8%
Outcome based education	46.1%

In the individual states, the superintendents picked the following as being less important today.

ILLINOIS

Outcome based education 49.4%

MASSACHUSETTS

Goals 2000 64.1%

The religious right 61.5%

Year-around school 52.6%

Contracted services vs. in-house 51.3%

TEXAS

Contracted services vs. in-house 64.6%

Year-around school 53.8%

Home schooling 52.3%

Goals 2000 50.8%

The religious right 50.8%

Outcome based education 49.2%

"More Important" Than in 1995

When the superintendents were asked which issues were "more important" today than in 1995, the following responses were received:

Technology/computers 63.9%

School finance in general 61.3%

State testing programs 54.8%

School finance equity 50.9%

The superintendents in the individual states responded in this fashion:

ILLINOIS

Technology/computers	87.4%
School finance in general	77.0%
School finance equity	67.8%
Community involvement in the schools	63.2%
Community relations	57.5%
State testing programs	47.1%

MASSACHUSETTS

State testing programs	61.5%
Technology/computers	52.6%

TEXAS

State testing programs	56.9%
School finance in general	55.4%

The Responsibility for a Solution

The final research question dealt with the responsibility for any solution to the issues raised in the survey. The superintendents were asked to select five of their "more important" issues and assign the responsibility for the solution of that issue to the local level, the state level, or the federal level. Thus, for each of the 230 responding superintendents, there was a maximum potential of five selections of responsibility, or a total of 1,150 maximum selections. Some did not have five "more important" issues and, therefore, did not select five areas of responsibility. For the three states as a whole, the responsibility

selected was as follows:

State responsibility 430 responses
Local responsibility 427 responses
Federal responsibility 70 responses

The individual state responses paralleled the responses of the superintendents taken as a whole on this question:

ILLINOIS

State responsibility 195 responses
Local responsibility 190 responses
Federal responsibility 38 responses

MASSACHUSETTS

Local responsibility 131 responses
State responsibility 129 responses
Federal responsibility 20 responses

TEXAS

Local responsibility 106 responses
State responsibility 106 responses
Federal responsibility 12 responses

DISCUSSION

The results of this project indicate that the issues did not change

substantially between 1995 and 1997 since 18 of 25 issues were judged to be the same in importance. To some extent, this seems to contradict the popular view that school administrators jump on every new trend/reform/issue and drop last year's issue.

The three areas which were considered as less important today, outcome based education, Goals 2000, and the religious right, are connected in an interesting way in that the religious right has voiced opposition to outcome based education and to Goals 2000. Now, the superintendents consider all three of these issues as less important. Also, Texas and the southern part of Illinois are both in the "Bible Belt," with a population which often espouses a fundamentalist approach to religion and education. The idea of the "religious right" may well be the accepted norm of behavior in many communities in these two states.

It is not surprising to find that school finance in general and school finance equity are listed as more important to the superintendents. As state legislatures have passed various laws to limit taxes, it has become more difficult for the superintendents to raise the revenue which they feel they should have. Since Illinois has been dealing with school finance equity in the recent legislature and Texas has been working with it through several court decisions for years, it is understandable that Illinois would consider this issue more important today than two years ago and Texas superintendents would say that it is the same in importance.

The move to establish school testing programs, either by the state or federal government, is relatively recent and is seen as more important to these superintendents. In Massachusetts, this movement to state mandated testing came about through the 1993 education reform act.

State control and influence are part of the testing pattern, and districts are both ranked and held accountable. Testing in Texas has also been moving forward with the emphasis on basic knowledge and academic skills, with districts being held accountable. Illinois has just released a list of standards for students to know. Testing will be based on these standards. While this survey did not ask superintendents whether they approved of such testing, it would be surprising to the researchers if the superintendents favored such "interference" from the state and federal governments.

The importance of technology and computers has increased tremendously in the last few years and superintendents are pressured to purchase the latest equipment, hire computer coordinators, train teachers to use the equipment, and connect everything to a network. This issue would be expected to be judged as "more important" than even two years ago.

"Board/superintendent relations" has been a pressing issue for superintendents for at least two decades. So, it is not surprising that the responding superintendents listed this item as "the same" in importance. Massachusetts passed its Educational Reform Act in 1993 which wrested power away from school boards, causing some to retaliate against superintendents. Perhaps this problem has declined in the last few years. At any rate, having the superintendents in all three states declare that this relationship carries the same importance as in the past does not mean that it is unimportant to them. It is still very important.

On the issue of responsibility, the superintendents spoke in a united voice. They do not want the federal government to solve these issues, but they do expect the state to assist the local school district and citizens in

dealing with these issues. They would probably declare that education is a state responsibility by law, with the functions delegated to the local level. All three states have very strong ties to the concept of local control. Texas is almost fanatical in its belief, still maintaining 1,142 school districts, not because of size, but because of an unwavering belief in the concept of local governmental control. Illinois, much smaller in area, still has 905 school districts despite repeated attempts by the state legislature to encourage schools to consolidate. However, unlike states like neighboring Indiana, Illinois has not mandated consolidation, knowing the feelings of its citizens toward local control. Illinois even has a state organization whose sole purpose is to encourage and maintain local control of schools. Massachusetts, too, shares the belief that towns and cities should govern themselves. The town meeting is still a popular form of local governmental control throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. School districts must still take their budgets to a local meeting for approval. This system may be inefficient and cumbersome, but the idea of local control has roots in more than two centuries of governance.

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